

Thinking Things Over

—By Vermont Royster—

War at Sea

A lone torpedo from beneath the sea and down goes a cruiser.

A single guided missile from 20 miles away and down goes a destroyer.

These haven't been the only naval casualties in that distant fighting between Britain and Argentina over the Falklands. But neither came in the midst of a general engagement where losses are expected. So they dramatized as nothing else could the vulnerability of surface ships at sea in a modern war.

The result has been a battle of words among those who must think about future wars at sea—military men, political leaders and all concerned about the nation's defenses—that will continue long after the Falkland struggle has been resolved.

For those two sinkings came at a time when the Reagan administration and its naval advisers are preparing to resuscitate old battleships and spend much of the navy funds on a few huge carriers rather than on a more numerous and diversified fleet of smaller vessels. If nothing else, the loss of these two ships in a matter of moments ought to give everyone pause.

Heretofore any questioning of the "big ship" strategy, such as was ventured here (Feb. 24), has brought outraged cries from admirals, spokesmen for the Navy League and others who feel that big ships should constitute the backbone of future fleets. It's been charged that any who question that strategy are really hostile to big navy spending in general and would have us defenseless on the sea.

Not any more. Elmo Zumwalt and Stansfield Turner, retired four-star admirals both, are no foes of the navy or a large budget for it. One is a former chief of naval operations, the other former president of the Naval War College as well as director of the CIA.

Admiral Zumwalt says that if he still had a voice in planning he would build "many and smaller ships" for the same money that will be spent on the big carriers and their supporting forces.

Admiral Turner, in a thoughtful article in a recent Newsweek, pleads for more ships (including carriers) which by their numbers are less vulnerable to being put out of action than a few, however well armored.

"Dispersing our sea-based airpower as widely as possible," he says, "prevents a crippled carrier from tying up too many aircraft and makes it more likely that a carrier will be where it is needed."

Neither admiral—nor any other thoughtful person, I think—supposes that surface ships will disappear from the sea in wartime. They cannot as long as we must be prepared to deploy and support military forces over wide areas of the world. Neither submarines nor airplanes can at present supply the huge tonnages of men, arms and materiel that surface ships can carry to distant battlefields, much less maintain the flow of food and other civilian goods that is equally necessary in wartime.

For any who have forgotten the example of World War II, the lesson was shown again in the logistics required to support the British forces in the Falklands thousands of miles from home.

To protect these supply ships as well as to deploy military power to far-off battles requires also surface warships—destroyers, cruisers, carriers, amphibious assault ships—and many of them. So the argument is not over "whether" surface warships but what kind.

Advocates of the battleship and the huge carrier contend that the modern larger ships can be better armored, supplied with more compartmentation and more sophisticated damage control equipment. That makes them, so runs the argument, less vulnerable than the Sheffield, a destroyer, or the General Belgrano, a cruiser of World War II vintage.

This is certainly true. Nimitz class carriers as well as the recycled battleships can take much more punishment than smaller ships before sinking or being put out of action. But that is only part of the story.

No admiral in his right mind would send a battleship or a carrier to cruise the sea alone; none did so even in World War II. For neither is invulnerable. Even a super-carrier, as Admiral Turner notes, has many extremely vulnerable points—aviation fuel lines, bombs and planes loaded with fuel on the flight deck—which cannot be hidden behind defensive shielding.

A carrier task force must be surrounded by a veritable armada of support ships, the larger and more expensive the carrier the larger the necessary armada. And today the danger comes not alone from enemy planes that might be fought off or from slow-speed submarines with short-range torpedoes. The danger now is from fast homing torpedoes and guided missiles launched from far away. Both can carry tactical atomic warheads that could finish off the largest ship afloat.

The simple, basic truth is that modern technology has altered the face of war, at sea as well as on land. This requires that admirals and generals rethink not only tactics but fundamental strategy, and that in turn requires a reexamination of war's weapons, from tanks to ships.

It's true enough that this is not a task within the competence of the ordinary citizen. It is also true, though, that it is the ordinary citizen who will pay for miscalculation by the military, pay in sweat and perhaps ultimately in blood.

So it behooves us to pay attention to the argument and to listen carefully to those with military experience who have been set free to say what they think without being any longer required to defend "official" doctrine. Admirals Zumwalt and Turner might just be right.

And who's right could make a lot of difference to those in future wars going down to the sea in ships.